DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 419 604 PS 026 509

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TITLE The Children's War: Towards Peace in Sierra Leone. A Field Report Assessing the Protection and Assistance Needs of Sierra Leonean Children and Adolescents.
INSTITUTION Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, New York, NY.
SPONS AGENCY Ford Foundation, New York, NY.; John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Chicago, IL.
PUB DATE 1997-06-00
NOTE 31p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; Change Strategies; Child Welfare; *Children; Foreign Countries; *Human Services; Peace; Refugees; Violence; *War
IDENTIFIERS *Sierra Leone; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

ABSTRACT

Based on a 3-week field visit to Sierra Leone and Guinea, this report investigates why children (ages 0-17) have become key figures in Sierra Leone's civil war, and explores the problems that war has caused them. The report describes significant new effects of violence on three groups of Sierra Leonean children, very few of whom have received any humanitarian assistance thus far: (1) those who have spent prolonged periods in forest "bush camps"; (2) unaccompanied adolescent girls who have been claimed by a variety of captors; and (3) young boys working in mining camps. The report also reviews two sets of problems besetting children in Sierra Leonean refugee camps in Guinea: (1) difficulties arising from the high ratio of females to males in the camps; and (2) the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) role as the central agency for the protection and support of refugees. The report notes that the Women's Commission advocates investing in Sierra Leone's future by directing education, skills training, and small credit programming at the majority of Sierra Leone's citizens--its youth. The report also discusses several other Commission recommendations. (EV)

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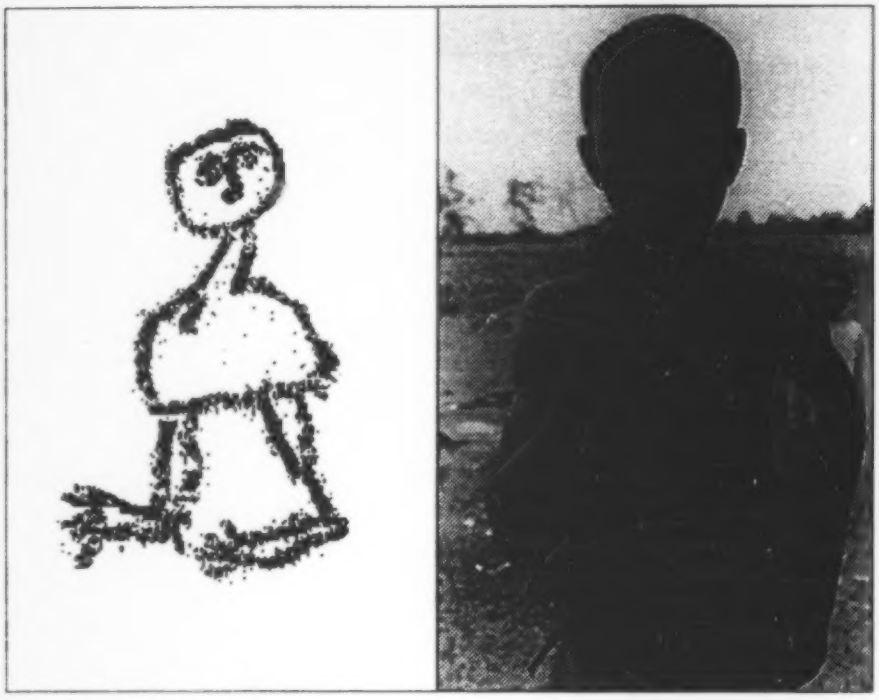
The Children's War

Towards Peace in Sierra Leone



A field report assessing the protection and assistance needs of Sierra Leonean children and adolescents

Women's Commission
for Refugee Women and Children

March 26 - April 16, 1997

PS 026509

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Mission Statement

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children seeks to improve the lives of refugee women and children through a vigorous program of public education and advocacy, and by acting as a technical resource. The Commission, founded in 1989 under the auspices of the International Rescue Committee, is the only organization in the United States dedicated solely to speaking out on behalf of women and children uprooted by armed conflict or persecution.

As part of an ongoing project to look into the protection of children in refugee settings around the world, the Commission sent a consultant to Sierra Leone and Guinea in March/April 1997 to investigate the conditions for war-affected children.

The Women's Commission would like to thank the Ford Foundation and John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation without whose support this project would not have been possible.

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Cover: Mohamed was a rebel captive who had lived in a "bush camp." His drawing, which lacks arms and mouth, is typical of pictures drawn by traumatized children who have spent time hiding in the forests. © Marc Sommers

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Executive Summary

Before the coup in May, 1997, Sierra Leone's war was probably the most overlooked conflict in Africa. Dwarfed by other humanitarian crises in Africa, the ongoing crisis in Sierra Leone needs continued and now increased recognition and programmatic support.

Perhaps half of the nation's population has been uprooted by conflict, including those recently affected by warfare in the capital city of Freetown. Before the coup, most of the displaced had recently returned to villages ransacked by combatants. A quarter of a million Sierra Leoneans remain in refugee camps in Guinea, which now has Africa's largest refugee population.

But perhaps worst of all, the degree of suffering that Sierra Leone's children and adolescents have endured has been unusually high; for six years of warfare, children have been prime targets, and often the primary victims, of violence. Children comprise half of the 10,000 Sierra Leoneans who have lost their lives in war and 700,000 of the country's 1.8 million displaced. The war has disabled up to 20 percent of the population, most of whom are children. As many as 80 percent of rebel soldiers are between the ages of seven and 14, and recent escapees from rebel camps have reported that the majority of camp members are young captive girls. In rural areas, the number of children in need could reach into the tens of thousands.

Based on a three-week field visit to Sierra Leone and Guinea, this report investigates why children (ages 0-17) have become key figures in Sierra Leone's civil war, and explores the problems that war has caused them. The report describes significant new effects of violence on three groups of Sierra Leonean children. Very few children in these groups have received any humanitarian assistance thus far:

1) those who have spent prolonged periods in forest "bush camps";

2) unaccompanied adolescent girls who have been claimed by a variety of captors; and,

3) young boys working in mining camps.

The report also reviews two sets of problems besetting children in Sierra Leonean refugee camps in Guinea:

- difficulties arising from the high ratio of females to males in the camps; and
- UNHCR's role as the central agency for the protection and support of refugees.

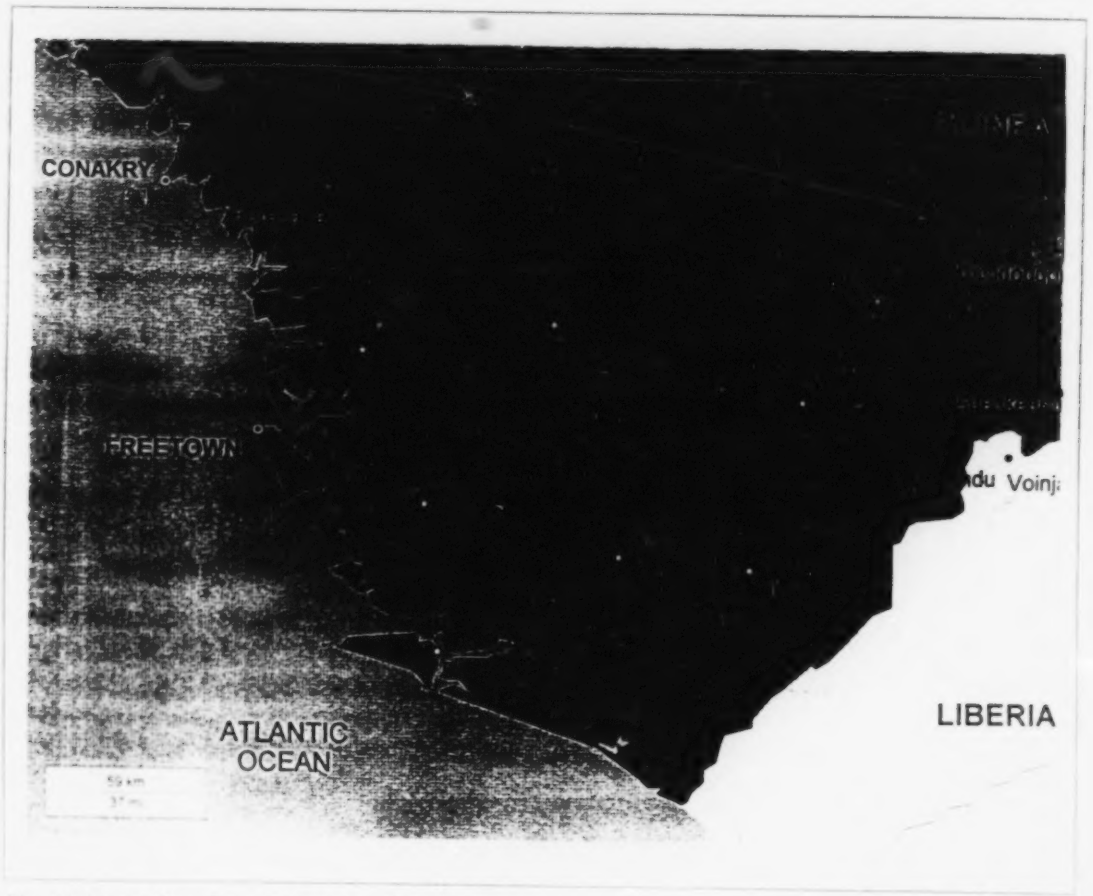
The May coup and its violent aftermath underscore the need to respond to the targeting of children for war by targeting children for peace and stability. The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children advocates investing in Sierra Leone's future by directing education, skills training and small credit programming at the majority of Sierra Leone's citizens - its youth. The Commission also calls for:

- a reorientation of humanitarian services that accounts for the shift of displaced populations from urban centers to rural villages;
- rapid assessments to adequately measure and understand the needs of "bush camp" children, unaccompanied adolescent girls, and boys in mining camps, and outreach-oriented programs to begin to address their concerns;
- revision of the Children in Especially Difficult Circumstances (CEDC) guidelines and proposed legislation to account for: (1) the health and protection needs of unaccompanied girls who have been claimed and absorbed into households against their will, and boys who populate the mining camps, and (2) the scope and implications of the "African tradition" form of care for unaccompanied minors;
- a thorough and swift response to long-standing concerns over the approach and operations of UNHCR programs for Sierra Leonean (and Liberian) refugees in Guinea.

The Women's Commission's Objectives in Sierra Leone

A recent Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children assessment trip to Sierra Leone and refugee camps in nearby Guinea found that Sierra Leone's future is as unsettled as its security is tenuous. In addition to violence in Freetown, the coastal capital, there continue to be spasms of bloodshed and banditry in the interior of the country. It is widely believed that "rebels" may infiltrate communities by dressing as government soldiers — who are already widely held under suspicion — or even as the villagers' local heroes and hired defenders, the *Kamajors*.

While this report will update the general situation of Sierra Leoneans, its central purpose is twofold: (1) to identify critical issues of concern for children and adolescents who have been uprooted by conflict in Sierra Leone, and (2) to suggest remedies for addressing their needs more effectively. The report will consider the reasons why young Sierra Leoneans became the central targets of war. Three consequences of this targeting for children and adolescents will then be explored, followed by a report on two important issues in the Sierra Leonean refugee camps in Guinea. The concluding section will recommend ways for improving critical services to Sierra Leone's children and adolescents. This report is based on a three-week visit (March 26-April 16, 1997) to Sierra Leone (up-country and the capital, Freetown) and to refugee camps in Guinea.



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Background

In the days after President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah of Sierra Leone and Foday Sankoh, the leader of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), signed a peace accord on November 30, 1996, hundreds of thousands of Sierra Leoneans displaced by war began to return to their homes. Still fearful of the unruly ways of both the government "soldiers" and the RUF "rebels," communities hired *Kamajors*, local civil defense units empowered by bullet-deflecting charms, to protect them. While local *Kamajors* have supplied a sense of security, most of the villages that Sierra Leoneans returned to had already been flattened and plundered by roving bands of fighters. Armed with limited materials, little cash, very few government supports and scant attention from the outside world, Sierra Leoneans have begun to literally rebuild their lives.

This reconstruction is taking place while the war continues. The recent overthrow of Sierra Leone's democratically elected government by military coup, and the subsequent advance of RUF troops into Freetown has shifted the central theatre of war from upcountry forests to the capital city. Yet while fighting has arisen in Freetown, much of the countryside remains dangerous.

Most Sierra Leoneans consider the continuing war pointless, which is one of the ways it is so unusual. The war began in 1991, when a small band of fighters entered Sierra Leone from Liberia, declaring their opposition to corruption and their support for democracy while raiding villages.

The devastating war that ensued was not inspired by ethnic rivalry. The combatants have employed few landmines. The RUF forces, who have opposed four successive governments in Freetown, have never amounted to more than a few thousand, and have never controlled much territory or a significant proportion of the population. Apparently drawing upon the techniques of Peru's Shining Path and Mozambique's Renamo[1], they have instead resorted to surprise raids designed to spread terror, loot property and capture young men and women. The RUF's reputation for dismemberment is widespread. "The rebels told me that they already had enough women to help them, so they came only to cut us up," a 15 year-old girl related after her right hand had been amputated. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has estimated that up to twenty percent of the population, largely children, has been disabled by the war.[2]

Although the earlier stages of Sierra Leone's civil war may have been somewhat comprehensible, conversations with Sierra Leoneans both young and old, well educated and poorly educated, rural and urban, suggested that uncertainty over why the fighting continues is widespread. In a country slightly larger in size and population than Ireland, the six-year war, which has displaced 1.8 million and left thousands dead or lacking arms or legs, boils down to matters of personal security. For Sierra Leonean civilians interviewed for this report, the concept of the notorious "sobel" (soldiers who impersonate and terrorize like rebels), which outside observers continue to dispute,[3] was largely irrelevant. A rebel, quite simply, is a person who behaved like one. Trying to figure out whether a fighter was actually an RUF fighter or a government soldier is as difficult as knowing whether the young man in question was forced to terrorize or chose to. Tired and bewildered by the war, issues of motivation and ideology have come to matter little.

Yet certain aspects of the conflict seem to be widely understood. It is generally assumed, for example, that the command center for the RUF is Kailahun, a peninsula-shaped district surrounded on three sides by Guinea and Liberia, from which the "rebels" exchange coffee and cocoa for rice and ammunition. The RUF's particular preference for turning captive children and adolescents into fighters, laborers and concubines is also

well-known, and it is not coincidental that most of the unrest has taken place in the vicinity of diamond mines.

Three recent events, all of which took place while the Women's Commission field assessment was underway, capture how violence in the countryside remains fluid and dangerously unpredictable. While the long-standing RUF leader, Foday Sankoh, remains under house arrest in Nigeria, his leadership is being contested. One contingent, led by Captain Dean Palmer, publicly challenged Sankoh's authority. In March, 1997, the Sierra Leonean ambassador to Guinea arranged a meeting between existing RUF leaders in Kailahun and Captain Palmer's delegation at the Guinean town of Nongoa, located across the Makona River from Kailahun District in Sierra Leone. Major Mosquito, then considered a Sankoh supporter, ambushed the visiting delegation as soon as they crossed into Sierra Leone. With hostages in tow, Major Mosquito declared himself the new RUF leader.

Meanwhile, young rebel fighters, some as young as eleven years of age, were captured by a squadron of *Kamajors* in Tonkolili District. Following an elaborate handover ceremony to government authorities, the captured combatants described three separate contingents of RUF groups that maintain bush camps in forests in central Sierra Leone. All three groups, they reported, are led by Liberian commanders, exiles from that country's civil war. Ranking just below them are RUF leaders from Kailahun. The ex-combatants reported that the Liberians are not inclined to surrender. They also reported that the majority of camp members are young captive girls.

In a third district of Sierra Leone (located between Tonkolili and Kailahun Districts), in the diamond-rich area around Kenema, a gunfight arose in a mine near Tongo late in March, 1997. This particular skirmish did not involve RUF fighters at all, but armed *Kamajors* who, reports suggest, discovered government soldiers in the mines. When the *Kamajors* challenged the soldiers' right to dig for diamonds, fighting broke out, and eventually led to a brief gunfight in downtown Kenema.

While villagers have already started to rebuild their houses and prepare their fields for planting, reconstructing rural communities has proven more difficult. Villagers scattered in terror when rebel fighting forces, and sometimes even government troops, entered their villages. As a consequence, former village residents are returning from as many as seven different wartime experiences. Many of those displaced from rural homes found relatively stable refuge in camps in provincial towns, particularly Bo and Kenema, in the Sierra Leonean capital, Freetown, or in refugee camps along the border, mainly in Guinea. Some villagers chose to spontaneously settle in urban areas, while less fortunate families hid in "bush camps," often referred to with the Mende term *soqothun*, or "in the corner." The least fortunate were those young men and women who were war captives or combatants, and they will be the most difficult to assimilate into village life again.

The spillover of warfare into Freetown, and the sudden return of hundreds of thousands of Sierra Leoneans to their homes has dramatically altered the social landscape of the country. Children were both primary targets and victims of the war; they comprised half of the 10,000 Sierra Leoneans who lost their lives in war and 700,000 of the country's 1.8 million displaced. It is vital that the situation and specific needs of Sierra Leonean children become better understood and directly addressed.

Targeting Children for War

The rebels amputated me.
-- 16-year-old girl, who lost her hand.

The RUF was mainly concerned to round up and conscript young people, including children.
-- Richards (1996:7)

I've been to eight wars, but this is the first I don't understand.
-- Veteran humanitarian aid official.

The disparate threads of diamonds, the targeting of children to serve as combatants and captives, the bush camps and the Liberians were once woven more closely together. The RUF's initial entrance into Sierra Leone took place in Kailahun District on March 23, 1991, but the invasion was inspired by one of the Liberian war's central figures, Charles Taylor. Evidently seeking to punish Sierra Leone for its support for a West African peacekeeping force (the presence of rich diamond mines just across the border was undoubtedly a second motivation), Taylor sponsored and promoted the RUF incursion into Sierra Leone.

It is generally believed that many of the rebel camps, particularly those outside of Kailahun District, are short of food supplies. Many of the stories about rebel attacks are connected not only to capturing youths, terrorizing villagers and looting, but to food, as well. Here is a 15-year-old girl's story:

I was injured at Tin Konko, near Bo. We were cooking, late in the evening. When [the rebels] came, we fled into the bush. I was running behind my sister, who was pregnant.... This [rebel] threw a rope, entangled me, and I fell. My sister got away, but I got dragged back into town. When we arrived, the rebels had eaten the food we had prepared. There were three [captured] women — two elders and myself. The rebels lay us down on a metal sheet, cut our hands off and told us to tell the military in Bo that the rebels did that to us. Then the rebels left, after looting the town, and left us undressed.

I don't know what I did to them to get this. Now I trust God. God will repay the people that did this to me.

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RUF troops used amputation to instill terror in villagers. Up to 20 percent of Sierra Leone's population is believed to have been disabled during the war.

The incoming RUF troops, initially not more than one hundred in number, immediately employed strategies that Taylor's fighters had already found successful: "The basic tactic was ... youth conscription, to constitute a viable fighting force and suggest a credible 'popular uprising.'"[5] Drugging youths before raiding a village or entering combat became commonplace. Ambushing government troops once they entered Sierra Leone's dense carpet of forests became another useful tactic. Camps housing the young troops — some estimates suggest that as much as eighty percent of all RUF forces are between the ages of seven and fourteen — as well as the growing number of young war captives, were established in forest

hideaways. The RUF's purported political agenda — to root out corruption and restore democracy in Sierra Leone — has been severely compromised by their excessively violent behavior. And yet, given their small numbers, spreading terror by raiding villages and committing atrocities has become a cost-effective way of influencing large numbers of people. Wreaking havoc simultaneously stretched the government's crisis management capacity and strengthened the RUF's standing as a fierce, and formidable, adversary. In the end, the negotiated peace treaty awarded RUF leaders with considerable political gains, and forced the government to withdraw their Executive Outcomes' mercenary contingent from the country.

Beyond sheer terror and destruction, one of the RUF's enduring legacies has been its use of young men (as well as women) as highly effective combatants. This has been paralleled in the national army, which tripled in size to 10,000 during the military regime of Captain Valentine Strasser from 1992 to 1995, and now has an estimated 13,000 soldiers. Many of the army's new recruits are youths, some as young as nine years old. Military discipline is uneven at best. The previous government had been afraid that downsizing the army could exacerbate growing disloyalty in the national army, and even inspire soldiers to "grab and loot" before they handed in their weapons. Consequently, many in the government turned to the *Kamajors* for military support. Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that *Kamajors*, not government soldiers, pushed "rebel" RUF fighters out of villages in the south and east of the country, while elements of the army staged a coup in the capital.

Change Inside Sierra Leone

In the fall of 1996, the estimated number of internally displaced persons (IDP) in IDP camps numbered about 700,000. Three months into 1997, only about 25,000 people remained in those camps. The sudden, spontaneous return of Sierra Leoneans to their villages has left humanitarian organizations with very little institutional knowledge of the new situation in recently repopulated rural areas of Sierra Leone.

In order to address this dramatic change, field investigation of the problems of children and adolescents in Sierra Leone was balanced between examining existing programs and approaches in Freetown, Bo and Kenema and visiting newly settled villages in Pujehun and Moyamba, two districts where war had displaced most of the local population.

Findings from this field research will center on three groups of Sierra Leonean children and adolescents that are currently receiving little or no assistance: "bush camp" children; unaccompanied minors, particularly girls; and young boys working in mines.

Out of the Bush

We displace dem, we sorry-o
We don loss we mama, we don loss we papa
we don loss we pekin dem, we nob get food for eat
we nob get closs for wear, we nob know wusai we day go

(We the displaced are sorrouful
We have lost our mothers, we have lost our fathers
We have lost our children, we have no food to eat
We have no clothes to wear, we do not know where we are going)

-- Displace (sung in the Krio language), by Ngoh Gbetuwai and The Kamajors"

Every time you go to a village, there are more and more people coming out of the bush.
-- Humanitarian agency official.

Sierra Leonean children in need have largely been defined by previous circumstances. War in the rural areas has meant that those who fled into towns became the primary recipients of humanitarian assistance and services. Most children's assistance projects have retained their urban focus, and have yet to adjust to the sudden return of the internally displaced to their villages. As the organizations have seen the size of their target groups dwindle in towns, competition has intensified. In Kenema and Bo, the number of children who may qualify for assistance probably ranges between several hundred and a couple of thousand. In rural areas, the number of children in need could reach into the tens of thousands.

During visits to villages where displaced persons had already returned to their homes, the Women's Commission investigated the range of children's war experiences. Returnees described that when rebels (or, less often, government soldiers) entered their villages, the residents scattered. In speaking with Sierra Leoneans who had been displaced from different villages, a similar pattern emerged. The relatively few villagers with sufficient cash resources managed to pay for transport to the nearest large town, mainly Bo and Kenema. Some eventually escaped to Freetown. But most of Sierra Leone's displaced fled directly into nearby forests. Although many would eventually arrive in major towns, it appears that a quarter of a million or more Sierra Leoneans may have remained in the forests, and most of the displaced experienced "bush camp," or soqoihun (hiding place) life, at least for a while.

Sierra Leoneans from different districts and provinces related similar descriptions of the turmoil and terror that overtook villagers following a rebel raid. Often using ropes to trip their prey, the invaders sought to capture adolescent boys and girls before they fled. They burned huts, sometimes with people trapped inside, amputated limbs, and looted goods, particularly food. Rebel attackers rarely remained long in villages. Instead, after demonstrating their might to the fleeing villagers, they loaded their captured youths with food and possessions and returned to their military outposts in forested hill areas.

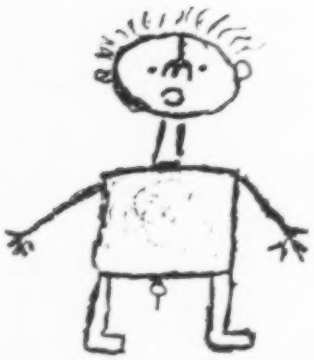
In the panic following a rebel invasion, many children were separated from their parents. Since the RUF's reputation for capturing boys and girls above the age of about seven was well-known, children that age may have been especially terrified. Indeed, fears that the RUF would steal more children influenced the development of bush camp society. Surviving groups organized themselves into units of approximately 30 people. After establishing a bush camp, men and adolescent boys would fan out as patrols, prepared to sound the alarm if they spotted any rebels in the area. Women and adolescent girls would search for wild yams, potatoes, roots and cabbage. After wild vegetables were exploited, trips in search of abandoned farmland crops were periodically risked. Such trips were always dangerous because of the chances of meeting RUF commandos also searching for food.

A series of precautions were taken to avoid notice by rebels. As smoke could signal their location to rebel patrols, bush camp residents only cooked after nightfall. Bush yams and other collected foods were placed over fires made in holes in the ground and then smothered with leaves. If someone did not return to the bush camp at night, after patrolling or foraging all day, it was assumed that they had been captured by the RUF. Preparations to move camp took place immediately, and the group travelled at night. The near-constant shortages of food meant that weak and sick community members had to be abandoned. Often,

In the village of Sahn Malen, in Pujehun District, "Bo Camp" children (that is, children who had been in organized IDP camps in the town of Bo) were paired up with "bush camp" children, and asked to draw a picture of themselves.

The bush camp children were barely able to draw on their own, and usually tried to use the Bo camp children's drawings as a model. Even when they did this, signs of distress — the lack of an arm or a mouth — were apparent. This informal experiment also suggested that the basic needs of Bo camp children were adequately addressed. Two matched pairs of Bo camp and bush camp children are shown below:

Bo Camp Children



Bush Camp Children

malnourished mothers without breast milk would have to wrap their infants in cloth to muffle their cries, and leave the child behind. Sometimes mourning mothers would remain with the child. The group would also have to abandon any elderly people who could not keep up.

Silence appears to have been a common method for protecting children in bush camps. Afraid that the sounds of children's voices would attract RUF patrols, many parents and guardians felt compelled to terrify children to keep them quiet. One group of bush camp survivors explained how "the children were told: 'If you talk, the [RUF] people will come and kill you. So stay quiet.'" Not surprisingly, silent play at the base camp was a common activity for young children. Forced to live in these isolated bush communities with little food and under highly stressful conditions, bush camp life has severely affected child survivors.

Almost nothing is known about Sierra Leoneans who survived for extended periods in these bush camps. Although many who eventually surfaced in Bo, Kenema, Freetown and other towns had some experience of bush camp life, those who were forced to remain there for as long as several years were neither likely to be counted in wartime statistics nor become recipients of humanitarian assistance. Statistics provided by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in Freetown suggest that war displaced 1.8 million Sierra Leoneans from their homes. Yet this "displaced" category only contains those who could be counted in refugee or IDP camps, or those estimated to have found refuge in towns. The remaining population of Sierra Leone — 2.4 million people — is considered "undisplaced but affected." Those who "took to the bush" for refuge and remained there would thus become part of this second category. They were, of course, seriously affected by the war, particularly the child survivors.

Although it would be difficult to arrive at an accurate estimate of the "bush camp" population without conducting an in-depth survey, field interviews indicate that it is significant, and could amount to more than a quarter of a million people. Evidence further suggests that the experiences of "bush camp" and town life during the war have led to dramatically different effects on children. Many of those who fled to towns had never been there before, and the exposure created several positive outcomes. In addition to receiving reasonable levels of security, nutrition and medical care, the suspicions that many parents held about girls' education, particularly the learning of English, were challenged. Parents from rural areas often contend that learning English makes girls "wayward," and can lead them to migrate to cities (where English is spoken), and assume inappropriate, dangerous behavior, such as wearing shorts, going to cinemas, consuming soft drinks and having many boyfriends. Yet parents who returned from urban areas, as well as educators, both reported that education for girls had become more popular among those who resided in urban areas during the war years.

In contrast, teachers in the makeshift village schools related that the educational abilities of students who have recently returned from bush camps have been seriously impaired. While children who attended schools in IDP camps or in urban schools tended to be alert and confident, the "bush camp" students were generally unresponsive. Some have serious difficulties in expressing themselves at all. In general, many bush camp children appear to have developed significant emotional and learning disabilities.

Unaccompanied Children

Most of the widely recognized programs designed to assist children in need in Sierra Leone fall into two types. One kind centers on child soldiers and is largely carried out by Children Associated with the War (CAW), which will be examined in the following

section. A second kind serves unaccompanied minors, and it includes orphanages, unaccompanied minor homes, and the process of tracing and reunifying lost children with their relatives. While the recent return of approximately 675,000 internally displaced persons to their rural homes has obviously not affected programs such as Catholic Relief Services' (CRS) urban youth centers, other programs, including services for unaccompanied minors and orphans as well as youth training, school assistance, amputee support and child nutrition, are still adjusting to the change. As one United Nations official observed, "people who have gone back [home] haven't received much direct support."

The total number of unaccompanied minors in Sierra Leone, another UN official reported, is estimated at 9,500. Among the towns overwhelmed by civil war, Bo appears to have been most affected by competition and rivalries between local NGOs with unaccompanied minor programs. This rivalry has involved local United Nations and Government officials and international NGOs operating there. Reportedly, the Ministry of Labor, Social Welfare and Sports and UNICEF were jointly involved in selecting representatives in each of the country's four provinces to handle the local activities of the national retracing program. The purpose of the program is to reunify unaccompanied minors with their families. With the war winding down, officials in some organizations have been accused of not participating fully in the retracing program. Some officials contend that returning minors to their families would eventually reduce the number of minors in their programs. This reduction could, by extension, also threaten their jobs. Such concerns may be fueling some officials' reluctance to participate.

At least three other issues concerning unaccompanied minors in towns remain in dispute. The first concerns the much-publicized plans of the Anglican Church to build an orphanage in Bo. Officials from a variety of organizations oppose this approach, apparently because it would create an institution that lacks local cultural roots. Several local and international organization officials explained that an orphaned child, according to local tradition, would be raised by other relatives, such as an uncle or grandmother. Accordingly, orphanages should be considered intrusive or, at the very least, unnecessary. It should be noted, however, that an orphanage already exists in Kenema.

The second issue concerns those local NGOs that have received recognition and assistance from international donors and partner organizations, and those that have not. This rivalry has directly included a number of local church-based organizations. Clearly, those with Catholic connections, such as the Kenema Diocesan Development Office (KDDO), CAW and the Unaccompanied Minors Project of Bo, have generally fared well. Others, such as New Life Services, the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and the Anglican Diocese, are seeking to improve their connections to local representatives of the international community.

The third issue is the widespread criticism that UNICEF-Sierra Leone has received for lack of leadership and vision. However, UNICEF's performance is expected to improve significantly; there has been a recent infusion of new personnel who are aware of the organization's problems and committed to solving them.

The disorder that has increasingly characterized child-centered assistance projects in Sierra Leone is now being addressed. Under the coordination of the Ministries of National Reconstruction, Resettlement, and Rehabilitation (MNRRR), Labor, Social Welfare and Sports, and Gender and Children's Affairs, and with support from United Nations Humanitarian Assistance Coordinating Unit (HACU), UNICEF, and a number of child welfare NGOs, guidelines are being established and national legislation recommended for what is termed

TABLE 1 Unaccompanied children in Sierra Leone, according to current CDEC estimates

No.	Groups of Children:	Number:	Percentage of total:	Estimated percentage receiving services:
1.	Children living & sleeping on the street without adult caregivers	3,000	32%	40%
2.	Children associated with military forces	2,500	26%	30%
3.	Children living in institutions	1,000	11%	100%
4.	Children living with foster families	3,000	32%	16%
Totals:		9,500	100%	

"Children in Especially Difficult Circumstances" (CEDC). This CEDC category is designed to address the problems of unaccompanied children (UACs). The "Interagency Strategy and Policy Guidelines for Unaccompanied Children in Sierra Leone" calls for three phases — preparedness, emergency care and interim care — that lead to reunifying unaccompanied children with their families.

While the initiative, and its particular strategy and guidelines, is extremely important, it should be noted that CEDC is designed to address the problems that afflict a specific population of children: approximately 9,500 unaccompanied children located in Sierra Leone and in nearby refugee camps. This number is separated into four categories of children (see table 1, p. 12).

Our findings indicate this number is just a fraction of the actual population of Sierra Leonean children in especially difficult circumstances. Given the size of the need, UNICEF, whose mandate is to lead the international community's response to children, is among those who have directed considerable energy to an unusually small target group.

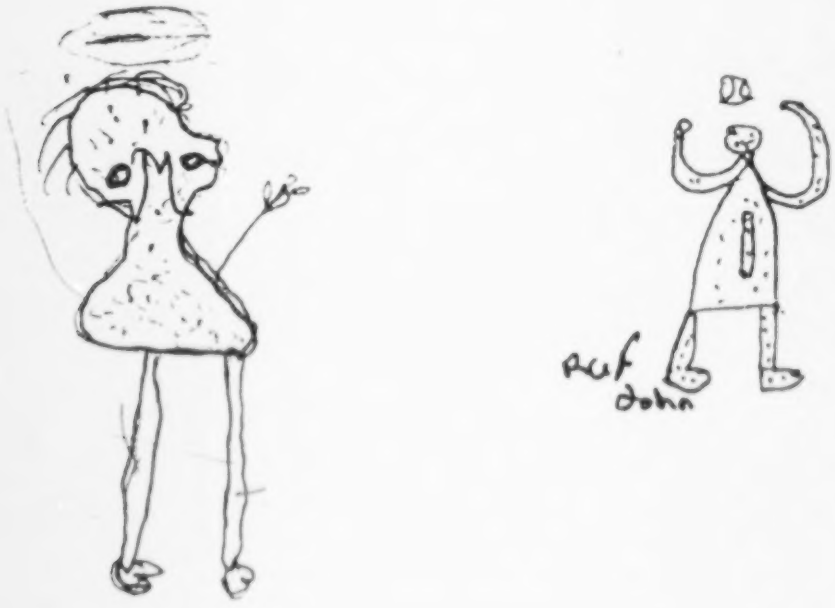
Young Women as Commodities

When we tell women to use condoms, the women say: "Miss, if you don't want my husband to pack me out, you better give me something else." Most of the women depend on men — they are the breadwinners. So what can you do for the women?
-- Clinic Officer, Planned Parenthood Association of Sierra Leone (PPASL)

Within the current system that supports unaccompanied children, the Women's Commission observed one disturbing phenomenon — the absence of large numbers of girls in existing UAC programs. Under the assumption that the war has preyed directly on, and seriously affected, large numbers of girls as well as boys, interviews and field visits strongly suggested that many girls in need — the ratio of boys to girls in existing institutions ranged between 2:1 and 3:1 — are not receiving assistance.

Two issues were consistently raised during interviews with local and international officials about this problem. The first concerns what many officials referred to as "the African tradition" of caring for unaccompanied children, and what the CEDC guidelines and strategy document defines as "spontaneous foster care." Although no thor-

Below are parts of two drawings by one 17-year-old woman who was taken captive by the RUF. On the left is how she drew herself. On the right is how she drew "RUF John," the young man who held her as a captive. In the original drawing, RUF John is drawn with an orange marker, while his penis was drawn with a green marker.



ough investigation had been carried out to locate and evaluate the condition of unaccompanied girls, it was assumed that many have been absorbed into families "according to the African tradition." This method of caring for unaccompanied minors has not only been accepted during the war years but relied upon. Confronted with limited support and thousands of children in need, organizations directed efforts at children they were immediately aware of, such as street children and amputees.

While comparatively few girls can be found in programs for Sierra Leonean children, male combatants who managed to escape from RUF base camps in April, 1997 reported that young captive women consti-

tute the majority of the base camp communities they had left. Indeed, the example of the RUF fighters' well-known use of large numbers of young women as commodities (apparently, the higher the rank of an RUF fighter, the more women they are allowed to keep) may be serving as a model for some military and civilian men. Although information about the scope and condition of unaccompanied girls living outside existing programs for children is limited, the one hundred or so girls who participate in the SEGA Project (Sexually Exploited Girls and Adults) at the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) in Bo provided information about the range of problems that this population faces. Some girls who were

This 17-year-old girl's story contains a number of important elements in Sierra Leone's civil war: the RUF rebels' capture of children, their drugging of child soldiers, their interest in controlling access to the country's rich mineral resources, their extremely violent behavior — and, following the girl's escape, an example of an unaccompanied girl who was captured and exploited by civilians before she could enter a program for unaccompanied minors.

I am from a village in Pujehun District. One day, I was walking to school, three miles from my village. It was a Thursday in 1993. I was sitting with the other six fifth grade students. I was clever by then.

We saw this helicopter hovering over the village near school. Our teacher said that something bad was happening, so he dispatched us to our houses.

We tried to go to a village nearby, where we had relatives. But a rebel stopped us, and fired [his gun] up in the air. He took us to a house and locked us up. Then, another helicopter came from Liberia. The helicopter dropped a bomb or a grenade. We learned that we had been trapped by the RUF rebels, who were now being attacked by the ECOMOG [West African peacekeeping force] "rebels." The RUF rebels took us to Liberia. After we crossed the river, we entered a vehicle [containing other young girls] with a commando on top and a driver inside with us. We met Sierra Leonean [government] soldiers firing on the vehicle. They deflated the tires, and killed six rebels, but not the girls inside with us. We tried to escape into the bush. But we were met by Foday Sankoh [still the primary RUF leader] and Mrs. Agnes Dean Jalloh [another RUF leader], who lived with Foday Sankoh.

I never saw Foday Sankoh kill anyone. He just used means [orders] to pass on commands to go to a village to attack, to destroy a town.

I lived with Foday Sankoh and Mrs. Dean Jalloh. I was a maid to Mrs. Dean Jalloh. Mrs. Dean Jalloh was always carrying her pistol. She locked children and things, and food, in one house. Once, we went to Kailahun and set houses on fire. Mrs. Dean Jalloh commanded rebels to burn houses with people inside. Then the rebels gave me and other [captives] bags to carry away. The rebels were slim and tall, because they were taking drugs and cocaine and marijuana.

Once, when I refused to clean Mrs. Dean Jalloh's shoes, she shot me in the leg. She was wicked to me. She used to beat me whenever she was angry. She used to beat me for no reason. Foday Sankoh pleaded [to Mrs. Dean Jalloh] on my behalf not to kill me.

In the RUF camp, there was a Muslim man who was so powerful, he had a charm. Fire came out of his mouth. This man used to drink human blood.

Another wicked woman was Fatamata, who killed my baby sister. Fatamata cut her throat. My sister and I had been locked in a house during a Sierra Leonean army attack [on the RUF camp]. The Sierra Leonean army soldiers set the house on fire. We made our way out of the house, and Fatamata caught my sister and cut her throat. [Then] Fatamata took my sister's head and gave it to me, and told me to bury it. Then [the rebels] cooked my sister's body and ate it.

[Once] on the Freetown Highway we would walk 24 miles [a day] towards Freetown. There were 60 [rebel] soldiers (four women, 56 men) and 40 captives (both boys and girls) to carry loads. The women [fighters] are spies, and go ahead to see when and where to attack. We would wait in the bush, and the 60 soldiers would go and attack vehicles on the highway, and kill all the people. Then the 40 captives would go out to collect the goods.

Our Brigade Commander was Colonel Carew. We camped near rutile and bauxite

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mines. Colonel Carew was the commander for the Bo town area, but he was working really for Foday Sankoh, who sent the 40 captives to the [RUF's] rutile mine.

I was with [Colonel Carew] for four years altogether. After working in the mines, I was sent to Daru town. While walking to Daru, we were only living on cassava and bush yams, and I got a foot infection. I was not allowed to marry [that is, become a rebel concubine] because I was with Mrs. Dean Jalloh [as a private maid]. So, whenever I was going to a dance, Mrs. Dean Jalloh locked me up in the house.

Once, I became very sick, swollen all over. [At that time] there was a confrontation between government soldiers and the rebels. This is when I finally escaped.

After I escaped, a soldier met me and took me to Kenema. I was admitted into the government soldier camp. They thought I was a rebel, so I was held under gunpoint at every moment. I told them I knew where Foday Sankoh and other rebels were. I showed them the route. Finally they took me to Kenema Hospital, and I was there for six months.

[Afterwards] I couldn't find my relatives. I went begging, looking for people to take care of me in Bo town. I stayed with a Lebanese woman, but I escaped when she abused me. The Lebanese woman told the police that I was a rebel. The police took me to live with one policeman and his family. This man is maltreating me. I haven't got any food today.

raped in their villages or IDP camps became street beggars or prostitutes. Others were taken into households either by men who had lost their wives during the war or families in need of domestic workers.

It is well known that the needs of women in Sierra Leone are great. The country already has the highest maternal mortality rate in the world, and only 11 percent can be considered literate. Evidence suggests that war has released a high degree of sexual violence and general abuse on adolescent girls. Unaccompanied girls, including many of those who have managed to escape war captivity, are thought to have been taken against their will as forced laborers or common law wives. Like commodities, they appear to have been claimed by combatant and civilian men alike, probably in significant numbers. Although the size of this population, and the range of abuses against them, are still not well known, existing evidence signals the urgent need for locating, protecting and assisting this population.

Young Men as Fighters and Miners

I voluntarily joined the [government] soldiers, because there was no other means of food... I killed three men and one woman. They were the same height as me, my age. They had guns, too. They pointed the guns at me, but they did not have any bullets.
-- Government soldier, age 14.

When I find my diamond, I'll be rich.
Then I won't have to listen to anybody.
-- Young diamond miner, Kenema.

Audat die, em mama wer black
(You that dies, your mother wears black)
-- Krio saying in Sierra Leone.

How did youths become the primary combatants in Sierra Leone's war? Part of the answer is suggested by the saying listed above: "Audat die, em mama wer black." The saying suggests that young boys are likely to be braver and more fearless in combat than adult men, because boys are not worried about who will care for their wives and children if they are killed. As

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Many young boys, including ex-combatants, live and work in the diamond mines, such as this camp near Sahn Malen Village.

unencumbered youths, only their mothers will mourn their passing.

The perception of boys as risk-takers also applies to non-combatant activities. During visits to villages near the town of Bo, relatively few young men were found to be residing there. Thus, as with the presence of comparatively few girls in child and youth programs, the question was asked: Where were the young men? The closest location was also the most popular — the diamond mine. Many of the villages that were emptied by RUF raids took place in the vicinity of such mines. The boys, and their families, usually returned to their villages with little or no cash on hand. With schools barely operating and few available opportunities in the rural areas for young men, working in the mines offered boys the chance to make a lot of money (but against considerable odds) while being sheltered and fed.

Interviews with diamond traders and miners suggested that the system for supporting diamond miners continued throughout the six-year war. While miners may search for diamonds by using their savings or working there part-time, many miners prefer to receive food, petrol (for the mines' water pumps) and other necessary supplies from a diamond trader, most of whom are of Lebanese extraction. While the miner who discovers a diamond is not bound to sell to the trader, the trader who has provided supplies hopes to receive the opportunity to purchase the miner's diamond.

Mining communities are populated with adult men (and some women), as well as boys — sometimes as young as seven or eight — who also work as miners. Together with humanitarian agency officials, miners reported that the mines contained ex-combatants. Demobilization program officials are aware that some of the boys and young men who qualify for training and other support in their programs have elected to work in the mines instead.

It is more common to hear the story of government soldiers than rebels. Not only are they more numerous — they are less afraid of hiding their identity because of what they did during the war. Here is an excerpt from an interview with a government soldier, aged 14.

I was in Pandabu village. During the war, my parents went away from me. The rebels made us all flee, and I was alone in the bush. After one week, the soldiers found me on the road. Among the soldiers was my uncle.... I was involved in active fighting. I killed rebels during the war.... After my first battle, my uncle [who was also a soldier] said he had a bad dream. He dreamt that rebels shot at him, and he fell down. When he was telling me this, the rebels came and captured him. When we chased the rebels, we found my uncle butchered near the road. His heart was taken out, and his head was cut off and placed on a chair. I feel good that I killed those rebels, because I revenged the death of the ones they killed.

Problems surrounding the demobilization initiative are significant. Although plans are in place for returning RUF combatants to civilian life, doubts exist as to when significant numbers of RUF fighters will surrender their guns. The RUF remains a powerful force in sections of Sierra Leone, and, as one humanitarian agency official commented: "The RUF doesn't allow soldiers to escape. They don't become ex-combatants. They become dead." In the meantime, most of the child soldiers that have received assistance in the Children Associated with the War (CAW) program have been from the national army. With the support and advocacy of UNICEF and local Catholic missions, and the approval of the Department of Health and Social Services, CAW has been able to provide several hundred child soldiers (including a handful of girls) with a six-month program of counseling, education, nutrition and medical services, followed by reunification with the child's family. The program has been widely recognized as highly effective. The Women's Commission field visit to Bo, however, also included interviews with former child soldiers, including former RUF combatants, who returned to civilian life with the assistance of organizations that have not received widespread recognition or support. Some former fighters explained that youth group programs which included a spiritual component, such as New Life Services, provided them with the kind of support that they had sought.

Problems in the Refugee Camps

Although thousands of internally displaced Sierra Leoneans have already returned to their villages, very few refugees have. Since more than 200,000 of the 248,893 refugees[11] come from Kailahun District, they cannot return because it is still occupied by RUF forces. Prior to the coup in May 1997, refugees from other districts had begun to return home on their own, but thousands had not repatriated because the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) plans for their return were not yet in place.

The Women's Commission site visit to refugee camps in Guinea centered on the area near Gueckedou, where most Sierra Leonean refugees live. Particular attention was paid to the two largest refugee camps for Sierra Leoneans: Koulomba (I and II), and Fangamadou (I and II). Interviews were also conducted with UNHCR officials, and officials from several of their NGO partner organizations in Guinea.

Findings from this field visit will concentrate on two issues of particular concern: the high proportion of young women (and women in general) in the refugee population, and the role that UNHCR has played in attending to the concerns and needs of refugees, particularly child and adolescent refugees.

A Conflicted Society

A binjay mui mu mu ngofi ngoi
A ua mu ya ma mu yea
A binjay mui mu mu ngakao ngoi
A ua mu ya ma mu yea
A binjay, a binjay, a binjay
A ua mu ya ma mu yea
A binjay Mende negoi hue

(Let's get up and harvest our coffee trees
Come let's go to our home

Let's get up and harvest our cocoa trees
Come let's go to our home
All of you get up, get up, get up
Come let's go to our home
Let's get up as there is sweetness in Mende-land)

-- Armu Yama (sung in the Mende language), by Ngoh Gbetuwai and The Kamajors[11]

There are very few men [in the refugee camps], and too many women.

-- Sierra Leone Refugee Committee member, Koulomba Camp, Guinea.

You are left alone with belly and no man.

-- Refugee woman explaining a common plight for refugee girls.

In Freetown, officials recently reported that 400 young refugee men have recently become *Kamajors* and are preparing to battle Major Mosquito and his RUF rebel forces in Kailahun District. In the refugee camps across the Makona River from Kailahun, additional details about refugees becoming *Kamajors* helped illuminate how Sierra Leonean refugee society is isolated, divided and troubled.

Repeatedly, refugee leaders described the issue of creating a *Kamajor* militia in Kailahun as one of great urgency for many in their community. The knowledge that most displaced Sierra Leoneans are already back in their homes, while refugees remain in exile, was keenly felt. Living along Sierra Leone's border yet still unable to go home, the many new songs that celebrate return inside Sierra Leone (including the popular "Armu Yama," excerpted above), inspire sadness, not elation. Doubt in the ability of the Sierra Leonean government and UNHCR and other international agencies to facilitate their return also appears to be widespread.

As a result, one thousand young refugee men recently volunteered to go through the *Kamajor* initiation rite. A *Kamajor* leader in Sierra Leone set the initiation fee at 1,700 Leones (about 2 US dollars) per person. Refugee leaders, however, failed to raise enough money for the volunteer force. The reason for this failure arises from a fundamental rift in refugee society — some refugees do not want to directly oppose the RUF. At the outset of the war in 1991, when the RUF entered Kailahun District, a significant proportion of male youths never became refugees in Guinea. Many were captured by the RUF, but refugees also described how some families were intrigued by the RUF's anti-corruption, pro-democratic platform, and left young male relatives to learn more about them. Six years later, the RUF is widely condemned by refugees for its trickery and brutality. Yet the RUF is also heavily populated by refugee relatives. Thus, as one refugee official related, "whenever there is a call to the [refugee] community to organize an attack against the RUF, many ... are opposed to it."

The predominance of females in Sierra Leonean refugee camps is striking. Koulomba, the largest refugee camp for Sierra Leonean refugees in Guinea, is 75 percent female, and the overall ratio of females to males is more than 2:1. And according to refugees, the number of young men in camps continues to decrease. Some joined the Sierra Leonean national army. Some, as described above, became *Kamajors*. Some never returned from searching for food across the river in Kailahun, and are assumed to have been captured by the RUF. Some left to mine for diamonds in Sierra Leone.

The gender imbalance has created an array of problems for refugees. A look at the incentives and disincentives for educating school-age boys and girls helps shed light on the kinds of problems that Sierra Leonean refugee children and adolescents face. Some young men who remain in the refugee camps have entered one of the many well-equipped refugee schools (relative to rural schools in Sierra Leone), but not simply to become educated. The majori-

ty of refugees are from Kailahun District, the current RUF stronghold, and they are afraid that their Kailahun address will mark them following their return. As a precaution, some adolescent boys and their families are motivated to attend school because they will receive a letter certifying their participation in education. Such a letter promises to remove suspicions of their participation as RUF combatants after repatriating to Sierra Leone.

For school-age girls, the matters are more complex. In a society that is overwhelmingly female, schools for refugees are overwhelmingly male. Lower-grade schools are 43 percent female (most girls leave school after the first or second grades), while upper-grade (7-12) attendance is only 26 percent female. Pregnancy among single adolescent girls is a serious problem: one school lost ten percent of its female enrollment to pregnancy in one month alone.

The battle to educate refugee girls has led the International Rescue Committee (IRC), which manages and supervises schools for Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees in Guinea, to adopt several creative strategies. IRC schools now allow pregnant girls to remain in school, a policy that many refugee teachers initially opposed in the belief that adolescent girls who get pregnant should be punished by being forced from school. The IRC Health Education Department promotes self-esteem and learning about health and reproductive issues through health clubs, presentations, skits and curricular materials. IRC also launched a community awareness campaign to persuade reluctant parents to send their children to school. The arguments set forth by IRC refugee officials did not preach the inherent value of education as much as reflect basic refugee realities, such as: educated refugees would become qualified to work for international organizations in the refugee camps; after refugees repatriate to Sierra Leone, they will need to be able to understand written notices about their entitlements; and education is more portable than wealth, so if they have to flee Sierra Leone a second time, they will carry their education with them.

Despite these efforts, most refugees perceive education as a luxury, particularly for girls. Few finish school, and very few examples of educated refugee women in positions of authority exist. Unaccompanied girls taken in by refugee families are usually not allowed to attend school, although their handling of domestic chores can allow the families' daughters to pursue education. Refugee education experts who worked for IRC also described a correlation between pregnancy and school in the minds of many refugee parents. One education coordinator related that many parents believe that if girls "go to school, they become pregnant." On their way to and from school, parents fear that "boys will grab [their daughters] and ruin their lives."

Indeed, the number of unmarried mothers in Sierra Leonean refugee camps is large, expanding, and a source of several problems. Refugee health officials expressed concern about the (largely undocumented) rise of reproductive health problems, among them an increase in sexually transmitted diseases (STD), including AIDS infection. A meeting with the women's society in refugee camp revealed how unmarried mothers often must choose whether to work for Guineans for as little as 18 U.S. cents a day (200 Guinean Francs), sell goods in the market (such as firewood), or enter into prostitution. Quite often, women barter sex for something they require. "If you have no connections [to] any man," one woman explained, "[you] can't do anything for yourself." Men may agree to assist women in various ways, such as chopping and hauling trees for firewood, but then may expect sex in return. The shortage of men in refugee camps has also led some refugee women to devise other survival strategies. "We are a lot of women," one refugee women's society member explained. "Sometimes [we]

can't get jobs work[ing] for Guineans.... Many of us try to attract Guinean boys, so maybe they can help us." The situation seems only to have been worsened by the women's apparent fear of relaying their concerns to the official refugee committees, which are run by men. "The culture does not allow a woman to confront men and tell them about our problems," another women's society member explained.

UNHCR Remedies to Refugee Problems

It is not unusual for the activities of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to come under criticism. Given the magnitude of need in the world, and the increasing attention paid to UNHCR's work, their mandate for protecting refugee rights and addressing refugee concerns seems only to be expanding. As a result, the expectations for UNHCR's response to refugee needs, particularly among educated refugees and many observers, can seem unreasonably high.

Even in light of high expectations, it is important to acknowledge that, in the case of Sierra Leonean (as well as Liberian) refugees in Guinea, the scarcity of programs for children and adolescents is dramatic. "As yet," a UNHCR official remarked, "no specific program for [refugee] children has been done until now." UNHCR also reported that the first family planning program for refugees is only now entering the pilot testing stage.

The scope of many UNHCR-supported programs appeared to be small and piecemeal (the IRC's high quality refugee education program was one of the few exceptions). Similar to the existing approaches of most NGOs inside Sierra Leone, many refugee programs were focused on the relatively few refugees located in urban areas. An array of impressive training and support opportunities were available to 230 refugee women at the Women's Training Center in Gueckedou, while, despite strong demand, brief and intermittent workshop opportunities were made available only to a small proportion of women residing in refugee camps. Existing reports of protection issues, such as refugee women entering prostitution for survival and the rape of three young refugee girls by a schoolteacher, have, according to officials from UNHCR partner agencies, scarcely been addressed by UNHCR protection officers.

UNHCR's decision to assign numbers instead of names to refugee household dependents has also made it virtually impossible to identify or track unaccompanied minors in the camps. Knowledge about their plight is also minimized by a stated UNHCR policy that assumes that, as one official commented, "in Africa, normal people are taking care of children." Accordingly, unaccompanied minors were allowed to be absorbed into existing refugee families, a process that UNHCR officials defined as part of "the African tradition." With the exception of support for a small number of refugee children in urban areas, assistance to unaccompanied minors is decidedly indirect — as dependents to refugee household heads, they simply share in whatever assistance the family may receive.

These specific shortcomings seem especially acute in the overall environment that surrounds UNHCR-Guinea's work. Indeed, criticism of their work performance — both internal and external, and expressed in private interviews and published reports — is unusually widespread, well-known and sharp. "UNHCR has no credibility whatsoever," one high-ranking humanitarian agency official complained. During interviews with donor, local and international non-governmental organization (NGO) officials and refugees from both Sierra Leone and Liberia, not one positive comment about UNHCR-Guinea's record was offered.

Interviews with UNHCR officials in Guinea also revealed a striking detachment from the plight of refugees. One official remarked that "we know [the refugees] do

not have enough food. But we give them what we can." Another stated that "Whatever we do, the refugees complain. It is never enough. So we just expect their complaints." Additionally, Sierra Leonean refugees and officials in partnership arrangements with UNHCR-Guinea consistently characterized local UNHCR officials as distant and unresponsive. As one refugee woman said, "Sometimes UNHCR comes, they take our names, they go — and nothing happens."

Six years ago, Sierra Leoneans entered Guinea as refugees. Six months ago, a site visit report by the U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR) stated that, "In Guinea, UNHCR should make whatever management changes are necessary to regain the confidence of donors, implementing partners, and UN partner agencies."[6] Nevertheless, the central finding of the Women's Commission field visit to Guinea is that, from the perspective of refugees, very little appears to have improved. Despite internal UNHCR audits and personnel changes, officials and refugees alike continue to be remarkably forthcoming with accusations of corruption, mismanagement and disinterest in the concerns of refugees by the UNHCR-Guinea staff.

These and other factors appear to have contributed to a failure both to confront many key issues that directly affect refugee children and adolescents, and to design and implement appropriate programs. New initiatives in these areas are important and worthy, and UNHCR's acknowledgment and support will be necessary.

Responding to Children's Needs in Sierra Leone

Before the May, 1997 coup, Sierra Leone's war was probably the most overlooked conflict in Africa. Dwarfed by attention paid to humanitarian crises in Rwanda, Zaire, Burundi, Sudan, Angola, and Liberia, the civil war engulfing this small West African nation, beyond the May crisis in Freetown, may not appear especially noteworthy. Journalists accustomed to wars with ethnic roots may be disappointed by the Sierra Leonean conflict. The casualty figures — 10,000 killed in six years — equals only a day or two of killing during Rwanda's 1994 genocide.

Yet the magnitude of destruction in Sierra Leone is unusually significant, and worthy of far more attention and support than it has been accorded. Half of the nation's population was uprooted by conflict, and most of the displaced recently returned to villages that had been ransacked and leveled by fighters. War in the capital has forced the quarter of a million refugees in Guinea, which now contains Africa's largest refugee population, to delay any repatriation plans they may have had. Perhaps worst of all, the degree of suffering that Sierra Leone's children and adolescents, as targets in the war and usually the primary victims of violence, has been uncommonly high.

Given the considerable needs of Sierra Leonean children, what should be done? Confronted with this question, one international donor official in Freetown wondered aloud (prior to the May 1997 coup) whether increasing the level of response to children's needs was appropriate at this time. After all, programs that address the needs of children and adolescents had already been in operation. With the pressing security, food and infrastructure problems that already exist in Sierra Leone, particularly in the aftermath of violence in Freetown, isn't it premature to call attention to specific population con-

cerns at this time?

The Women's Commission contends that it is not premature. Dramatic changes in the Sierra Leonean situation, and continued difficulties with programming for refugees, call for adjusting existing approaches to the pressing needs of children and adolescents. The coup in Freetown and the subsequent warfare have directly threatened the city's children. Camps for those previously displaced by rural violence are now virtually empty.

The need to improve service delivery to Sierra Leonean refugees in Guinea is longstanding. Even before the May, 1997 coup, some organizations in Sierra Leone had begun to consider revisions to existing program approaches. Yet the problems and needs of Sierra Leoneans have remained largely overlooked by many in the international community.

Recommendations

The May, 1997 coup and its violent aftermath only underscore the need to respond to the targeting of Sierra Leonean children for war by targeting Sierra Leonean children for peace. The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children recommends that vigorous investment in Sierra Leone's future must direct appropriate education, survival and job skills and small credit programming to Sierra Leone's youthful majority.

Capacity-enhancing strategies and methods, such as distance education for skills training, accounting, budgeting and general business literacy need to be piloted. Appropriate workforce education and small credit loan programs for youth should be tested. Community-based literacy and numeracy, open to children as well as adults, should be advanced. In short, to counter ongoing attempts to exploit children for destructive wartime purposes, children and adolescents in Sierra Leone must be supplied with appropriate tools and opportunities for developing a stabilizing, growth-oriented future.

The Women's Commission also calls for:

- A reorientation of humanitarian services that takes into account the shift of displaced populations from urban centers to rural villages.
- Rapid assessments to adequately measure and understand the needs of "bush camp" children, unaccompanied adolescent girls, and boys in mining camps, and outreach-oriented programs to begin to address their concerns.
- Revision of the Children in Especially Difficult Circumstances (CEDC) guidelines to account for: (1) the particular health and protection needs of unaccompanied girls who have been claimed and absorbed into households against their will and boys who populate the mining camps; and (2) the scope and implications of the "African tradition" form of unaccompanied minor care in both Sierra Leone and the refugee camps.
- A thorough and swift response to longstanding concerns over the approach and operations of UNHCR programs for Sierra Leonean (and Liberian) refugees in Guinea.

The following are recommendations for addressing the changed circumstances and critical areas of concern for specific Sierra Leonean children and youth.

1. Outreach to Adolescents, Particularly Young Women

The need to recognize and respect the cultural values and customs of African societies should not overwhelm the need to recognize and protect the rights of children. Accordingly, the implications of reliance on what has been labeled "the African tradition" (or "spontaneous foster care") calls for careful reflection. Interviews with agency and government officials indicated general agreement that some unaccompanied Sierra Leonean children have been absorbed into families against their will.

Given evidence suggesting that this population of children contains a large proportion of girls, the need to locate and assess the psychological and physical condition of young women who have been forced to serve in households against their will is particularly pressing. The levels of sexual violence, emotional and physical trauma, malnutrition, and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are likely to be significant. Educational levels are likely to be low, and appropriate self-sufficiency training needs will be high. Once this population has been identified and assessed, outreach programs to address their needs should be developed and implemented. Local experts will probably prove especially helpful in successfully identifying and reuniting children with their families. In addition, the proposed CEDC guidelines and legislation should maintain stringent monitoring and evaluation policies for "spontaneous foster care." They should also directly identify unaccompanied girls as a particularly significant protection concern.

Judging from initial responses, it should be noted that recognition of this unseen population of children (most of whom are likely to be girls) may come under criticism from some of those in leadership positions in Sierra Leone and, perhaps, inside the refugee camps. Developing appropriate identification and outreach strategies may upset household situations that have already been established. However, support for the protection and health needs of silenced young women will likely be forthcoming from such groups as Planned Parenthood Association for Sierra Leone (PPASL), the Women's Movement for Peace, the YWCA in Sierra Leone and the Ministry for Gender and Children's Affairs, as well as several international agencies and refugee women's societies.

2. Outreach to Child Miners

From the perspectives of humanitarian and government agencies, it appears that the idea of rural "community" has largely been defined in terms of returnees to villages. Similar to recommendations for young women listed above, the Women's Commission recommends that the condition of young boys and ex-combatants located in mining "communities" be assessed. Outreach strategies that can return young boys to village life should be piloted and implemented. Developing appropriate protection and health provisions for adolescent boy miners should also be tested and provided. Configuring appropriate outreach strategies will obviously have to be very carefully constructed, as mining communities may have tense, highly competitive and potentially explosive social environments.

3. "Bush Camp" Children

There is a pressing need to assess the high number — possibly ranging into the tens of thousands — and level of need of children who have had to endure the harsh conditions of "bush camp" life for prolonged periods. Some education officials remarked that the children's psychological problems might only require short-term approaches, as the children's ability to rapidly recover from traumatic conditions in the forests may be high. The Women's Commission recommends that approaches which address the psychological problems that bush camp life may have produced be piloted swiftly and monitored carefully. The trials that "bush camp" children have endured, which could certainly be described as "especially difficult," should also be recognized and addressed as part of the CEDC initiative.

4. The Refugee Camps

As recommended above, timely and effective evaluation and reform of UNHCR operations is necessary. More specifically, the generally low level of programming for Sierra Leonean refugee children (ages 0-17) calls for urgent action. The existing program approach needs careful reassessment. Such an assessment should incorporate the particular concerns relating to the high proportion

of women in refugee society. Identifying, tracing and reconnecting separated children with their parents; providing effective and available reproductive health services for adolescent girls and women; developing available and appropriate self-sufficiency training programs for adolescents and adults, which both recognize and address the pressing economic needs of refugee women; reforming the means through which UNHCR and other organizations receive information from refugees (in order to increase refugee women's representation); and providing social awareness workshops designed to improve communication between refugee men and women are all urgently necessary.

Acknowledgements

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Thanks also to Chakshu Patel, grants specialist, Women's Commission, Robert Carr, desk officer for Sierra Leone, UNICEF, Peter Due, United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs, and Laura Marks, program officer for West Africa, International Rescue Committee.

Special thanks to all of the children and adolescents who shared their stories, drawings and photographs for this report.

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Endnotes

1 Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth & Resources in Sierra Leone, by Paul Richards, London: James Currey, and Portsmouth, NH: Heineman, 1996.

2 Africa Research Bulletin, Dec. 1st-31st, 1996, p. 12513.

3 The U.S. Committee for Refugees ("USCR Site Visit to Sierra Leone and Guinea: September/October 1996", by Tom Argent,1996), for example, describes 'sobel' activities in considerable detail, while Richards questions their influence: "It is hard to judge how widespread a phenomenon this is, since the concept of 'sobel' (soldier by day, rebel by night) fits an enduring cultural notion that all social action in a multi-cultural society is two-faced..." (Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth & Resources in Sierra Leone, by Paul Richards, London: James Currey, and Portsmouth, NH: Heineman,1996, pages 6-7).

4 The Mende constitute the predominant ethnic group in the Southern and Eastern Provinces, where much of the war has taken place. Many members of smaller ethnic groups in these areas also speak Mende.

5 Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth & Resources in Sierra Leone, by Paul Richards, London: James Currey, and Portsmouth, NH: Heineman, 1996, page 5.

6 Africa Research Bulletin, Dec. 1st-31st, 1996, p. 12514, and Rod Mac-Johnson, "The Healing Begins", in African Comebacks: Strategies for Survival (Toward Freedom issue), Feb., 1997, page 10.

7 A South African-based mercenary armed force, which has been active in conflicts in Angola, Zaire and elsewhere in Africa.

8 From "Armu Yama Muyeh", recorded at Island Studio, and distributed by Super Sound Ltd., both of Freetown. "Displace" was translated by Joseph M.A. Samba, Production Specialist, International Rescue Committee, N'zerekore, Republic of Guinea.

9 Source: UNICEF staff in Freetown.

10 Also from "Armu Yama Muyeh", recorded at Island Studio, and distributed by Super Sound Ltd., both of Freetown. "Armu Yama" was translated by Joseph M.A. Samba, Production Specialist, International Rescue Committee, N'zerekore, Republic of Guinea.

11 This figure appears to have risen significantly since the May 1997 coup.

12 "USCR Site Visit to Sierra Leone and Guinea: September/October 1996", by Tom Argent for the U.S. Committee for Refugees, 1996, page 4.

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